

DRAFT Environmental Assessment

**Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek Riparian Road
Reclamation**

A Future Fisheries Program Project

June 2010



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

Table of Contents

Preface	3
1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action	3
1.1 Proposed Action and Need	3
1.2 Location	5
1.3 Authority	5
2.0 Alternatives	6
2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action	6
2.2 Alternative B – No Action	6
3.0 Affected Environment	6
3.1 Land Use	6
3.2 Vegetation	6
3.3 Wildlife Species	7
3.4 Fisheries and Water Resources	7
4.0 Environmental Consequences	8
4.1 Land Resources	8
4.2 Air Quality	9
4.3 Water Resources	9
4.4 Vegetation	9
4.5 Fish and Wildlife Resources	10
4.6 Noise	10
4.7 Land Use	10
4.8 Risk and Health Hazards	11
4.9 Aesthetics, Community Impact and Recreation	11
4.10 Public Services, Taxes and Utilities	11
4.11 Cultural and Historic Resources	12
4.12 Cumulative Effects	12
5.0 Need for an Environmental Impact Statement	12
6.0 Public Participation	13
6.1 Public Involvement	13
6.2 Duration of Comment Period	13
6.3 Offices/Programs Contacted or Contributing to this Document	13
7.0 EA Preparation	14
References	14
Appendices	
A. Map of North Chamberlain Conservation Project area	20
B. Map of affected roads for the Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek Riparian Road Reclamation Project	21

PREFACE

The Blackfoot River watershed in western Montana is located at the southern terminus of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. Land and waters here afford crucial habitat and connectivity for many fish species, including bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and mountain whitefish. The area also supports wildlife game species such as elk, deer, and moose, as well as grizzly bear (Threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act) and a multitude of Montana Species of Concern¹.

By August 2010, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) intends to purchase a conservation easement from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) for the protection of 18,000 acres known as the North Chamberlain Conservation Project² within the Blackfoot watershed. The easement would encompass portions of Chamberlain, Pearson, Bear, and Little Fish Creeks, (portions of Missoula and Powell Counties) as well as numerous other small tributaries. The North Chamberlain property contains westslope cutthroat trout (WSCT) populations important to the conservation of the Blackfoot River's sport and native fisheries. Following the completion of the conservation easement, TNC expects to sell the property to Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to be part of its forest management program.

In conjunction with the expected conservation easement and DNRC's purchase of the property, FWP and DNRC cooperatively developed guidelines for forest management activities in order to preserve fisheries and wildlife habitat while allowing for timber harvest. That document is known as the Standards for Forest Management and would be in effect for perpetuity. The Standards focus protection on the riparian areas of streams that support WSCT. This Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek Riparian Road Reclamation project would enhance and further protect the riparian areas and reduce sediment input into streams by removing roads from riparian areas and reclaiming roadbeds to forested habitat. Riparian areas also provide important wildlife migration corridors and habitat.

1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Proposed Action and Need

FWP's Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP) is proposing to provide partial funding to Big Blackfoot Trout Unlimited (BBTU) for reclamation of roads that encroach upon important spawning streams for WSCT, and coincident construction and improvement of upland roads to maintain forest management and public access. The proposed project includes:

¹ A native animal breeding in Montana that is considered to be "at risk" due to declining population trends, threats to its habitats, and/or restricted distribution. The purpose of Montana's SOC listing is to highlight species in decline and encourage conservation efforts to reverse population declines and prevent the need for future listing as Threatened or Endangered Species under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

² The North Chamberlain Conservation Project EA is available from Region 2 FWP, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula, MT 59804 or online at <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicnotices/notice.html?action=getPublicNotice&id=2367>. The Decision Notice for that EA is also available from Region 2 FWP or may be viewed online at <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicnotices/notice.html?action=getPublicNotice&id=2409>.

- Reclamation of 5.5 miles of road within the riparian areas of Chamberlain Creek, West Fork Chamberlain Creek, and Bear Creek (Missoula and Powell Counties);
- Upgrades to 2.3 miles along East Fork Chamberlain Creek Road and construction of six short road segments of new upland road (2.8 total miles) to maintain management and public access; and
- Removal of six stream crossings (culverts and old bridges) from perennial streams and upgrading two existing stream crossings with bridges to improve fish passage and reduce sediment input into streams.

See Appendices A and B for a map of property and location of proposed road work.

There is a total of 152.4 miles of road within this property; the majority of roads lie behind locked gates or barriers and are not open to public motor-vehicle access. The vast majority of roads are abandoned logging roads, with about 14 miles (9%) open to motorized use by the public.

Over time, the proposed project would reverse the process of habitat simplification brought on by a reduction of instream wood and correct other ecological impairments in areas of excessive road encroachment and related riparian timber harvest. FWP first identified road-related problems (loss of instream wood, sediment runoff to streams) while undertaking aquatic habitat surveys the 1990 (Pierce 1991), and then again in a 2008 survey (Pierce et al. 2009). The 1990 survey specifically identified a sharp decrease in the number of large instream woody stems (>12" [inches] diameter) from about 20 stems/100 meters (328 feet) upstream of the encroachment problem to zero where roads have encroached for two miles upstream.

Despite past placement of some instream wood, wood counts in 2008 suggest a continued (~ [approximately] 30%) decline in the number of large instream wood stems in Chamberlain Creek within the area of road encroachment over the last 20 years (e.g., average of 8.2 large [>12" diameter] woody stems per 100 meters in 1990 versus 5.8 in 2008). Currently, the West Fork of Chamberlain Creek, a stream substantially damaged by past forest practices (roads, timber harvest) and heavy grazing (Peters 1990) supports the lowest concentrations instream wood (Pierce et al. 2009).

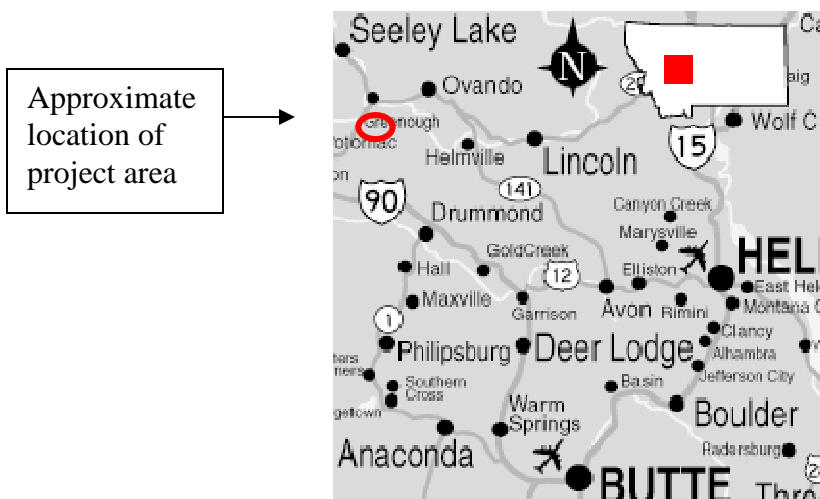
Besides improving wood recruitment, the project would increase shading by replacing roads with trees, decrease sediment input by eliminating streamside gravel roads and instream culverts and their maintenance, and improve fish passage by removing culverts suspect in their ability to pass fishes during some times of the year.

Both Chamberlain and Bear Creeks are connected to and support spawning runs of WSCT from the Blackfoot River. These fish spawn and rear in project tributaries, migrate to the Blackfoot River to mature, and later return to streams to spawn. The project area of Chamberlain Creek specifically supports concentrated cutthroat spawning (Schmetterling 2001). Migratory cutthroat trout primarily from Chamberlain Creek contribute to a high-valued angling opportunity while in the Blackfoot River (i.e., the highest angling pressure/unit area for the Blackfoot River).

The project would be bid out and contracted by BBTU. Since the property is expected to be owned by DNRC, that agency would provide technical input and oversight during the planning and implementation of the proposed road improvements.

1.2 Location

The project area is located in the Blackfoot Valley, south of the Blackfoot River, stretching from the junction of Montana Highways 83 and 200 (Clearwater Junction) on the west to Ovando on the east. See Appendices A and B for a map of property and location of proposed road improvements.



Legal Description of the Affected Area:

Missoula County: 9.1 miles of road

T 14 N, R13W--Sections 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17 and 18

Powell County: 1.5 miles of road

T14 N, R14W--Section 13

1.3 Authority

FWP has the authority through its Future Fisheries Program (Administrative Rules of Montana 12.7.1201) to restore essential habitats for the growth and propagation of wild fish populations in lakes, rivers, and streams through voluntary means. Funds may be used for long-term enhancement of streams and stream banks, instream flows, water leasing, lease or purchase of stored water or other voluntary programs to enhance wild fish and their habitats.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Alternative A--Proposed Action: For FWP to provide partial funding for road improvements along Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek

FWP's Future Fisheries Improvement Program proposes to provide \$100,000 for the

reclamation, removal, and improvement of portions of Chamberlain Creek, West Fork Chamberlain Creek and Bear Creek Roads. The entire project is estimated to cost approximately \$209,000. The project would affect 10.6 miles of roads and would reclaim riparian habitats, reduce sediment inputs to streams, improve fish passage, and maintain management and public access via alternative roads outside the riparian areas.

2.2 Alternative B--No Action: FWP would not provide any funding for road improvements along Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP's FFIP would not contribute funds for the road reclamation project along Chamberlain Creek, West Fork Chamberlain Creek and Bear Creek Roads. Riparian roads would not be reclaimed.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.1 LAND USE

The area has long been used for forest resource (timber) production; although no active timber harvest is currently in progress. Timber harvest has occurred in two main phases. The first was conducted by the Anaconda Company around the turn of the last century (1900). Evidence of this phase remains, most noticeably along the larger creek valley bottoms, as very large and old stumps bearing loggers' springboard notches. The latter phase occurred mostly in the later decades of the twentieth century by Plum Creek Timber Company and its predecessor, Champion International. It was during this latter phase that accelerated logging led to the removal of forest canopy, and the dense network of access roads was constructed.

3.2 Vegetation

The property is primarily forested land with a mixture of forest age classes and stand structure. The area has been historically a working forest and is currently comprised of second-growth stands of Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), western larch (*Larix occidentalis*), lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), subalpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*), and Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) (ERG 2009).

The riparian corridors are generally narrow and laterally contained within valley alluvium and colluvial hill slopes. Historical logging and channel alterations are extensive within the riparian areas and steep adjoining hill slopes, many of which also contain logging access roads that contribute sediment to riparian areas. The riparian zones are dominated by the Douglas-fir/red-osier dogwood (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*/*Cornus stolonifera*) habitat type at lower elevations and the spruce/red-osier dogwood (*Picea*/*Cornus stolonifera*) habitat type at mid to upper elevations. Mountain alder (*Alnus incana*) is a dominant, understory shrub in many of the sites.

Invasive weed species are present. These are especially concentrated along both active and abandoned roadways, and at other sites that have been disturbed by human activities, such as timber harvest sites and livestock grazing areas. The riparian areas within the targeted acres remain relatively free of weeds.

3.3 Wildlife Species

Elk use the area's abundant woody browse and grasses, riparian corridors, and regenerating harvest units all or part of the year. Similarly, the area has designated mule deer winter range, and both mule deer and white-tailed deer are abundant throughout the year. Moose are also commonly observed.

Canada lynx (Threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act) habitat is present and researchers have documented consistent lynx presence. The riparian corridors provide critical connectivity between these lynx and the larger Clearwater watershed population just to the north.

FWP routinely documents grizzly bear presence in the area. Riparian corridors provide important connectivity between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and currently unoccupied habitat to the south.

Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana, including the highest density and diversity of breeding birds relative to other habitats. Riparian habitat along the Chamberlain, Bear, and West Fork Chamberlain Creeks are bordered by dogwood, alder, and willows. Conifers, with a streamside understory of broadleaf shrubs, and scattered cottonwood and aspen, dominate most of the riparian habitat. These conifer riparian habitats may be narrow compared to the broad riparian habitats along the Blackfoot River, but they are critical to maintaining species diversity in the project area, as well as overall water quality in the Blackfoot watershed.

The project area lies along a major raptor migration route. Forest and riparian areas on the project area provide important foraging and roosting habitat for migrating forest hawks, including northern goshawks (a Montana Species of Concern), Cooper's hawks, and sharp-shinned hawks.

3.4 Fisheries and Water Resources

The creeks possess exceptional native fisheries values, including among the highest concentration of WSCT spawning within the Blackfoot Basin. The quality of both spawning and rearing habitats in this system is related to riparian health conditions and the habitat functions provided by instream wood (Schmetterling 2000, 2001). The large reduction of instream wood brought on by timber harvest and road encroachment has resulted in "simplified" habitat, a corresponding reduction in spawning and rearing habitat quality, and overall reduction in numbers for all fish (Pierce 1991, Pierce et al. 2009). Improved riparian condition would improve and protect the already high numbers of WSCT in the affected areas.

Among the various streams, WSCT life history traits present include stream-resident and migratory (fluvial) fish. Resident WSCT spend their entire life in tributaries; whereas fluvial fish hatch and rear within tributaries migrate to the Blackfoot River to mature, and later return as adults to spawn. The larger tributaries--Bear and Chamberlain Creeks--are all naturally connected to the Blackfoot River and support spawning runs of fluvial WSCT. The "genetic purity" of WSCT stocks ranges from 96% to 100% depending on location and downstream

relationships with rainbow trout. Chamberlain Creek also supports low densities of bull trout (Pierce et al. 2008). Non-native salmonids (brook, brown and rainbow trout and hybrids) are also present in low densities in lower Chamberlain Creek watershed. Where stream crossings are changed, WSCT genetics, past passage conditions, and non-native trout presence would be evaluated to determine the risk of genetic introgression of and competition with WSCT above the stream crossings.

Chamberlain Creek surveys showed a WSCT-dominated community with densities that decrease in the downstream direction from about 30 fish/100' (feet) below the mouth of the West Fork Chamberlain Creek (mile 3.9) to about 13 fish/100' near the mouth (mile 0.1). Young-of-the-year (YOY) WSCT were common at all three sampling locations. Brook trout in low numbers were also found at mile 1.9, increasing slightly at the upstream location (mile 3.8). Low numbers of YOY brown trout were only found at the mile-0.1 survey location. Low numbers of WSCT were found in Bear Creek at stream mile 1.4. No other fish species were observed in upper Bear Creek.

Chamberlain Creek has also been the focus of past restoration actions. Previous restorative actions involved livestock grazing changes, road upgrades emphasizing sediment reduction, channel reconstruction, the placement of instream wood and water leases with downstream landowners. Remaining fisheries impairments and/or influences include road drainage (sediments), road crossings, and reduction in riparian vegetation.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

4.1 Land Resources

Proposed Action: The proposed project requires the use of heavy construction equipment to upgrade sections of existing (upland) roads and to reclaim roads within the riparian area. The majority of these activities would disturb soils in the local areas while work is being completed. There are nine different soil types represented through the ten targeted sites that include various gravelly loams and complexes (USDA Soil Survey database, 2/26/10). Slope angles range from 4% to 60% depending upon the project location (USDA Soil Survey).

The clearing, excavating, and stabilization of the road bed and turnouts necessary for the new road construction (2.8 miles) would require the movement of soils and trees along the road's path. Since the proposed project would be under the guidance of DNRC to ensure proper road condition for its future ownership, the agency's best management practices for road work would be used as guidance to ensure the location of new roads are on stable geology, the design of the roads would have minimal disruption to natural drainage patterns, and that there is appropriate water dispersal features to minimize erosion (DNRC 2006).

No Action: The riparian areas would remain in an impacted condition and long-term fish and wildlife values would remain in a diminished state due to extensive roads within the riparian areas. The only ground disturbing activities anticipated would be those required for ongoing maintenance to existing open roads to ensure public safety.

4.2 Air Quality

Proposed Action: The use of heavy equipment for the proposed 5.1 miles of road improvements and the retirement of 5.5 miles of roads would increase airborne particulates in the immediate area where the work is being done. Additionally, increased amount of dust is expected to be generated by an increase in volume of vehicles accessing the jobsites for the duration of the project period. Overall air quality and particulate levels are expected to return to pre-construction levels once the proposed project is completed.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, the ambient air quality would remain at its current composition.

4.3 Water Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, water resources would improve over the long-term since some of the active roads would be improved or redirected away from stream corridors to reduce sediment flowing into nearby creeks. Sections of Chamberlain, West Fork Chamberlain, and Bear Creek roads identified for reclamation are currently within riparian zones and negatively affect fish and wildlife habitat and diminish water quality. The reclamation, closure of roads and recovery of riparian vegetation is expected to improve nearby water and habitat resources, because soils and vegetation important to maintaining cold and clean water, filtering sediment and providing for aquatic habitat maintenance processes would be reestablished and perpetually protected.

There are no proposed changes in drainage patterns, alterations of a creek's course (including flooding), and/or changes in water rights or other water users. However, floodplain processes would be reestablished.

Six stream crossings on perennial streams would be either removed or upgraded with structures to allow the uninhibited movement of aquatic species and provide for natural channel function. These stream crossing projects would undergo separate environmental review associated with the stream permitting laws of Montana. These permits would include: 1) Montana Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act (310) permit through the Missoula and Powell County Conservation Districts; 2) Federal Clean Water Act (Section 404) permit through the US Army Corps of Engineers; and 3) Short-Term Water Quality Standard for Turbidity (318) authorization from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. The road reclamation project would also be subject to these permits and all related conditions established.

No Action Alternative: The selection of this alternative would allow designated sections of Chamberlain, West Fork, and Bear Creek roads, which are adjacent to their respective creeks, to remain. Sediment from those roads would continue to degrade water quality and fisheries habitat over time, and shading and large woody debris recruitment would remain diminished.

4.4 Vegetation

Proposed Action: If FWP were to help fund the proposed road project, some of the activities would require the removal of limited areas of existing trees and understory in order to construct the new sections of road and to improve 2.3 miles of East Fork Chamberlain Road. However, where the roads are reclaimed, riparian forests would reestablish along riparian areas. Trees and

shrubs that can be used to stabilize road fill slopes and prevent erosion would be saved. Once the project segments are complete, disturbed soils would be reseeded with native local vegetation to reduce soil erosion and stabilize areas.

By state law, DNRC is required to manage noxious weeds on its properties, and that agency would implement the Trust Land Management Division Weed Management Plan to decrease the possibility of noxious weeds becoming established in newly disturbed or restored areas.

No Action: If this alternative were chosen, DNRC would continue to use the guidance of their weed management plan to reduce existing noxious weed infestations and would continue to manage the forest resources for the benefit of their Trust Land beneficiaries.

4.5 Fish and Wildlife Resources

Proposed Action: The proposed road project may move wildlife away from the immediate area while the construction is taking place but normal animal patterns are anticipated to return to pre-construction levels when the improvements are complete.

The presence of approximately 2.8 miles of new road is not expected to impede wildlife movements since there are numerous miles of old logging road through the property. Wildlife would benefit of the reduction of riparian roads because these areas are heavily used by migrating wildlife.

No Action: The selection of the No Action alternative would have no effect on existing fisheries or wildlife resources since no portions of the habitats would be altered. Under the no action alternative, riparian areas along Bear, Chamberlain, and West Fork Chamberlain Creeks would remain in an impacted condition due to existing roads that traverse through riparian areas. Sediment from the roads and reduced shading and large woody debris recruitment would continue to negatively affect stream habitat conditions and perpetuate chronic impacts to riparian areas that negatively influence fish and wildlife populations.

4.6 Noise

Proposed Action: There would be a temporary increase in noise levels in the vicinity of the work sites due to the construction equipment and contracting staff working at the locations. After the completion of the project, noise levels are expected to be slightly higher than pre-installation levels in the areas where new road segments have been established and where the existing road has been improved because new traffic levels are expected. Where the road segments were reclaimed, noise levels are expected to be below current levels since those areas would be closed to motorized vehicles.

No Action: Current ambient noise levels would remain unchanged if this alternative were selected.

4.7 Land Use

Proposed Action: The proposed action would not alter current land use within the property. Timber management and recreation activities would continue but via the new or improved roads. Road that are retired and reclaimed are not expected to impact DNRC's timber management or

restrict public access within the property, since numerous other primary and secondary roads would remain open within the property.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, forest management by DNRC would continue, as well as public recreation opportunities.

4.8 Risk and Health Hazards

Proposed Action: Road construction activities have inherent risks. When such operations are taking place, public access to the local area may be temporarily restricted to DNRC staff or contractors in order to reduce the risk of accidents.

Under DNRC management, herbicides would be used to reduce or eradicate noxious weeds on the property, as per the DNRC's Trust Land Management Division Weed Management Plan. Trained, licensed professionals would conduct any weed treatment and storage/use of chemicals in accordance with proper operating procedures and label instructions to minimize potential unintended consequences to wildlife, vegetation, and visitors to the property.

No Action: Under this alternative DNRC would continue to implement its weed control measures under the guidance of its Weed Management Plan.

4.9 Aesthetics, Community Impact and Recreation

Proposed Action: Opportunities for recreational activities on the property would remain available to the public, such as hunting, hiking, mountain biking, fishing, snowmobiling, and dispersed camping. However, some recreational activities would likely be restricted in areas where active road projects are taking place for public safety reasons.

The public's access to upland sites in some areas would increase with an upgrade to 2.8 miles of roads. However, access to riparian areas along the Bear, West Fork Chamberlain, and Chamberlain Creeks would be reduced with the reclamation of 5.5 miles of roads.

Some of the viewshed would be changed since the new road segments would likely require the removal of limited areas of vegetation and disturbance of soil during construction and for the short term. These impacts would influence only small percentage of the overall property's aesthetic value. Over the long term and after the revegetation of the targeted areas recover, visitors are expected to appreciate new conductivity provided by the roads with limited manipulation of the forest. Additionally, the new and upgraded roads would provide safe access to portions of the forest for timber management vehicles.

No Action: Existing recreation opportunities on-site would go unchanged. Aesthetic values would remain unchanged.

4.10 Public Services, Taxes and Utilities

Proposed Action and No Action: Neither the Proposed Action or the No Action alternative would affect existing public services, property taxes, or utility easements.

4.11 Cultural and Historical Resources

Proposed Action: FWP's proposed action would not directly affect any known cultural or historical resources. By Montana law (22-3-433 MCA), all state agencies are required to consult with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) on the identification and location of heritage properties on lands owned by the state that may be adversely impacted by a proposed action, i.e., road work, timber harvest, etc. If any previously unrecorded cultural resource sites were to be discovered during road building or reclamation, work would be halted until SHPO could be consulted.

No Action: No known cultural or historic resources would be disturbed, because no ground disturbing activities (i.e., road construction) would be initiated. DNRC would still need to consult with SHPO if any culturally sensitive or historic areas were discovered.

4.12 Cumulative Impacts

The property has been subjected to the construction of roads to provide access to the forest for timber harvest and management for decades. The proposed action seeks to move or reclaim the road segments that have negatively affected fisheries and aquatic habitat over time through sediment runoff into nearby creeks. Additionally, the construction of the new road segments would provide additional public access to the forest for recreation activities, as well as DNRC timber management activities. The overall percentage of roads being reclaimed and added to the existing road density of the overall property is minimal and is not expected to diminish the quality and quantity of wildlife species and habitat.

Short-term, localized disturbances to vegetation, soils, wildlife density, and public access is anticipated during the construction period. However, mitigation measures and permit requirements would reduce impacts to those resources at the completion of the project. Stressors to wildlife are expected to be only for a limited amount of time, and FWP expects wildlife density and diversity in construction zones would return to pre-construction levels when heavy equipment and staff depart.

The effects of this project would have an overall positive influence on the human and ecological conditions of the conservation parcel.

5.0 NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, FWP does not believe an EIS is required because of the corrective nature of the project and the environmental benefits associated with the project. Disturbances to the physical environment within the targeted areas would be mitigated below levels of significance through the restorative steps taken by the contractor after the project is completed and to meet permitting requirements.

6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

6.1 Public Involvement

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- One public notice in each of these newspapers: *Independent Record* (Helena), *Missoulian*, *Seeley Swan Pathfinder*, and *Silver State Post* (Deer Lodge);
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties;
- Public notice and posting of the EA on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page <http://fwp.mt.gov> (under “Recent Public Notices”).

Copies of this EA will also be available for public review at FWP Region 2 Office in Missoula and at the FWP Headquarters in Helena.

A public meeting may be scheduled during the comment period if there is interest by the public. This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having few limited physical and human impacts.

6.2 Duration of Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for 33 days beginning June 4, 2010. Written comments will be accepted by FWP until 5:00 p.m. on July 6, 2010 and should be mailed to the address below:

Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek Riparian Road Reclamation
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Headquarters
3201 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804

or email comments to psaffel@mt.gov

or phone comments to 406-542-5507.

6.3 Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document:

Ecological Solutions Group, LLC.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Wildlife and Fisheries Division

Lands Bureau

Legal Bureau

Wildlife Bureau (Regional biologist)

Montana Natural Heritage Program

Montana State Historic Preservation Office

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

7.0 EA PREPARATION

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APPENDICES

- A. Map of North Chamberlain Conservation Project area
- B. Map of affected roads for the Bear Creek and Chamberlain Creek Riparian Road Reclamation Project